

Thank you distinguished members of this committee. I am Denise Johnson from Billings, MT. I am the mother of two children who we were blessed to adopt through the foster care system. As a result of my own personal, positive experience, I believed that if a child was in foster care, it was because the parents did something that warranted the child's removal.

But then friends were wrongly accused of child abuse and their infant daughter was put in foster care. As their nightmare unfolded, the father was sent to jail, both parents lost the ability to work in their professional careers since their names went on a child abuse registry, their life savings was depleted, and worst of all, their daughter was harmed. Today they are finally all together again but are so financially devastated that they live in the basement of a friend's home and are under constant fear that CPS will take their daughter away again.

As a result of what happened to my friends, I began researching CPS and to my horror, realized that the system meant to protect children is out of control. In the years since my friends were so unjustly treated, I have heard the stories of many more families who have been treated unfairly by case workers who have too much power and not enough accountability. Bottom line: The system is broken. And although there are clearly cases where children need to be removed from dangerous situations, there are far too many cases where children are snatched from loving family and given to complete strangers. They then become part of the population that will experience some of the worst outcomes imaginable. They will become those

- who have less chance of graduating from high school with less than 5% earning a college degree.
- who experience PTSD at a higher rate than our soldiers returning from war
- who make up 40% of our jail population and homeless shelters
- who become pregnant and career criminals by the time they are 20.
- who are unemployed and receive public assistance at 4 times that of the general population
- who are 4 times more likely to commit suicide and be hospitalized for serious psychiatric disorders
- who will carry the trauma inflicted on them by this system onto their children and grandchildren
- AND who end up as victims of sex trafficking as their desire to belong and to be loved is exploited. Statistics indicate that over 65% of children rescued from sex trafficking have been or are currently foster children.

With these outcomes, logic would tell you that it's time to make changes, not gradual slow changes, but a complete overhaul of the system. In Montana, we have managed to take what was 1000 broken children and families in 2009 and turn it into 4000 broken children and families in 2017. At this rate, there won't be a family in our state that hasn't been devastated by our current system.

With all due respect for the process and the speed at which government works, our children simply cannot wait for another study to be completed, another legislative session to convene, or another bill to make its way to the Governor's desk. This very day, there are hundreds of children in Montana who are going to bed terrified because they have no idea what happened to their mamas, or grandparents, or schoolmates. They are crying themselves to sleep...as are the families that love them. They are contemplating suicide because they have given up hope...as are their families.

So I ask...Does human life really mean that little to the people of our state? Does it have to personally affect us before we believe it's happening? We need an immediate, unbiased review of every case in this state, starting with the ones you are hearing about today. We need to bypass the cumbersome court system that contributes to the brokenness and allow mediation to begin healing families. And we need to help families to remain intact by offering services before their children are removed from their homes in order to create long-term family stability instead of generational trauma.

These children do not belong to the state. They are not commodities to monetize and pass around like a bag of groceries. They are our children, yours and mine and we have a responsibility to fix the mess that has been created with our current system. We need to get and keep children home that should be home so there are resources and time for case workers to address the children who are truly in danger. Otherwise, next year the state will once again be explaining to this committee why children are dying even after CPS has been made aware of their situation.

Our children can't wait. They need us to act on their behalf NOW. Thank you for your time and attention to the children in crisis in our state.

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